"Refusing Legibility: Astate Solutions and the World-building Project of Mutual Aid"
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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the sociology of the state has become interested in the various ways that non-state actors and organizations have come to take on the responsibilities and powers of the state (Campbell and Morgan 2011; Clemens 2017; Fox 2012; Marwell 2004; Poppendieck 1998; Orloff and Morgan 2014). This scholarship has highlighted how the state's reach has extended by means such as co-optation (Robinson 2020), incorporation (Roychowdhury 2021; Ferguson and Gupta 2002), and consent-building (Rodríguez-Muñiz 2017) that lead non-state actors and organizations to become entangled in the folds of the state. Embedded within this line of research lay questions about legibility, or state projects of "knowing" their populations through mechanisms like registrations, mapping, and standardization that facilitate the state's ability to appropriate, control, and manipulate its population (Scott 1998: 2; 77). The demonstrated centrality of the state in political sociology indicates the complexity of operating not just within, alongside, or against the state, but *without* it.

Responding to a growing literature on the reach of the state into non-state sectors to address issues of welfare, this article attends to mutual aid as an astate (read: deliberately *without* the state) solution to issues of need facing Chicago communities from 2021 through 2024. It asks: How have mutual aid actors taken on the responsibilities of the state without the state itself? Put differently, how has refusing state legibility influenced mutual aid actors in efforts to take on responsibilities expected of the state? While research abounds on resistance to the state, the refusal of legibility in astate efforts to address social welfare issues remains understudied in sociology.

Where we routinely hold the question of resistance as a facet of state power (Bourdieu 2014; Althusser 1969; Foucault 1982; Omi and Winant 2014; Gramsci 1992; Weber 1918; Hall 1984), I suggest that refusal of legibility projects and efforts to operate without the state can also

inform how we understand state power. Building on the sociology of the state, I examine the motivations of mutual aid actors, their astate solutions to meet needs, and their efforts to refuse state legibility in service of an alternative world-building project. The intention here is not to engage questions of state capacity and outsourced responsibility, but rather, to consider how the pervasive presence of the state in everyday life can constrain solutions to issues of social welfare and drive alternatives that reach beyond the state. Just as the collective action behind political demands on the state are "shaped in relation to the structures and activities of states" (Skocpol 1985:22), so too are the solutions that mutual aid actors carve out as alternatives.

STATE LEGIBILITY

Political scientist James Scott argues that legibility projects are central to statecraft (1998:2). State legibility projects became a critical tool for the consolidation of modern state power, allowing state representatives to simplify, standardize, document, and monitor complex and illegible social practices to facilitate administrative ordering of both nature and society (Scott 1998:20;89). As modern states embraced linear progress, the expansion of production, and increasing control over nature (Scott 1998:89-90), knowing who and what lives under the state became more important. Inversely, being known by the state has long been key for groups issuing political demands (Paschel 2018; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2022), making claims to belonging (Quisumbing King 2022), and seeking material support from the state (Mora 2014).

Sociologists often take for granted state legibility and the presence of the state as typical conditions of everyday life under modernity. What it looks like to refuse legibility and the presence of the state remains underdeveloped, however. Existing examinations of how everyday people have refused legibility focus on historical examples. For instance, political scientist Neil J. Diamant's (2001) study of the widespread resistance and accommodation of state efforts to reshape

family relations is centered on Maoist China in the mid-twentieth century. Similarly, Mara Loveman's (2007) study of uprisings against the civil registration of births and deaths are focused on nineteenth century Brazil. Written from the position of the young twenty-first century, this scholarship illustrates efforts to evade the flattening effects and consequences of state legibility projects in instances where the conclusions are foregone: those states have long since won these battles to render their populations and their relations legible. This article seeks to unsettle the assumption of state legibility in the present by analyzing how mutual aid groups refuse legibility in working towards a future that is yet unknown.

## ASTATE SOLUTIONS AND MUTUAL AID'S WORLDBUILDING PROJECT

Mutual aid, as it is popularly recognized today, has received scant attention in American sociology. But in 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic and racial uprisings erupted following the police murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, the idea of mutual aid began to circulate widely across social media in requests for monetary support for housing, medical bills, and bail funds as well as localized community groups providing meals, grocery delivery, and prescription pickups. Amid the term's growing popularity, one definition of mutual aid gained traction:

> *"Mutual aid is when people get together to meet each other's basic survival needs with a shared understanding that the systems we live under are not going to meet our needs and we can do it together RIGHT NOW! Mutual aid projects are a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government, but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable."*
> (The Big Door Brigade, "What is Mutual Aid?")

This definition emphasizes (1) unmet needs under the state, (2) political change outside of electoral government, and (3) the urgency associated with creating conditions for survival, three themes that also emerged in my interviews with mutual aid actors and throughout my participation with a mutual aid group. I found that mutual aid efforts intentionally avoided involvement with local electoral politics, politicians, and state legibility schema altogether. The solutions that mutual

aid actors pursued to address localized need in their communities were those that would allow them to operate without or outside the state. The prominence of these factors has evinced what I refer to as an *astate* solution to unmet need and an investment in world-building that has been at the heart of mutual aid efforts emerging out of the unrest of 2020.

I suggest that mutual aid actors' refusal of state legibility and astate solutions to unmet need signify an endeavor towards an alternate social and political formation. This is what I refer to as a *world-building project*. That is, mutual aid operates beyond the reach of the state to "[build] social relations that are more survivable," as The Big Door Brigade definition outlines. Mutual aid actors partner change in the present with an effort to build, through their actions and without the state, an alternative that does not currently exist. As such, the astate solutions that emerge in mutual aid offer sociologists an opportunity to reconsider what evading state legibility looks like.

DATA, METHODS, AND ANALYSIS

This paper draws on participant observation with a mutual aid group and semistructured interviews with mutual aid actors in Chicago, Illinois over the course of three years. Through ninety-minute interviews with people involved in different mutual aid groups throughout the city, I examine what motivates them to actively participate in mutual aid by committing their time and energy to these efforts. As an active participant in a mutual aid group, I analyze how mutual aid actors evade state legibility projects, such as by relying solely on community contributions, creating protocols for conflict de-escalation and nonengagement with police, and avoiding 501(c)(3) status. I draw on interview data for insight to the challenges mutual aid groups face in their worldbuilding projects, such as sustaining volunteer capacity and funding. This empirical analysis invites political sociologists to reexamine the reach of state power and the limits of state legibility projects to think differently about the state and what exists beyond it.